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ABSTRACT

The protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown" misinterprets experiences that befall him because he cannot escape what Jean Piaget calls "egocentrism"--lack of awareness of anything outside one's immediate experience. Today's college students, reading Hawthorne, misinterpret the story, since they too manifest a certain degree of egocentrism, indicated by their writing. In a study of 14 students' free writings, "I" was used with great frequency; for 12 of the students, it was the most frequently used word. Walter Weintraub, in an analysis of psychopathology, considered the frequent use of "I" an indication of self-preoccupation. Four ways to reduce this egocentrism and to develop students' critically perceptive readings of literature would be to instill in them (1) an understanding of reading at a level more complex than the most evident, (2) objectivity about reading, (3) recognition that irony is frequent in fiction, and (4) tolerance of ambiguity. These guidelines would help readers develop a more mature understanding of literature, as would identification with the audience instead of with the protagonist. Limited exposure to written language and lack of extensive language use prevents student readers from understanding how writers manipulate language, and thus from arriving at a self-satisfying interpretation of literature. Students must learn to be sufficiently egocentric to believe that their opinions have value, but objective enough to escape from a too-personal reading of literature or world view. (NKA)

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Egocentrism and the Problem of Critical Thought

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by

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Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" is among the short stories most frequently anthologized in introductory literature texts published in this country. As is characteristic of Hawthorne, the easy reading of the story is deceptive, paradox abounds, and no interpretation resolves the abiding ambiguities. Interestingly, the protagonist's misinterpretation of the meaning of his experiences is strikingly similar to that of my students.

A young man, Goodman Brown, departs from Salem, Massachusetts, one evening to spend the night in the woods, leaning behind his wife, Faith, to whom he has been married for three months. She is understandably concerned about him, and he urges her to shut herself in their house and go to bed early.

Once in the woods, Brown meets, almost certainly by arrangement, a man who is obviously the devil incarnate. For a while they travel together. They encounter Brown's aged catechism teacher, and the devil gives her his enchanted walking stick to aid her on her way. After saying several times that he will not continue, Brown parts from the devil. While alone, Brown hears his church minister and deacon pass him on horseback on their way to a meeting.

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Bewildered and horrified by strange celestial effects above and sounds all around him, Brown plunges onward. He believes that he hears his wife's voice. Then, fluttering down through the air, one of Faith's pink ribbons catches on a branch in front of him.

"My Faith is gone!" Brown cries, and in despair he rushes on until he reaches a clearing in which a black mass is taking place. All the people of Salem are in attendance, all those whom Brown had heretofore thought to be pure and unsullied. Aghast, Brown stands before the altar at which the devil is preparing to welcome him into that company of the damned. Brown discovers his wife, Faith, beside him. At the last instant before their admission into the company of evil, Brown shouts, "Faith! Faith!...Look up to Heaven and resist the Wicked One!"

Brown finds himself alone in the clearing, and he slowly makes his way back to Salem. Once there, he passes those whom he saw the night before. They greet him, but he shrinks from them. Goodman Brown even passes Faith without a word as she skips out to meet him, her pink ribbons in place.

The narrator asks, "Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest, and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?"

The brief remainder of the story--one paragraph--chronicles the consequences of that night on the rest of Brown's lengthy life. It is a life of sadness, distrust, desperation, resentment towards and sense of superiority over his fellow townspeople, so much so, that at his death, we are told, "they carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone; for his dying hour was gloom."

My students feel, with Brown, that Brown has discovered the essential evil in all the others of Salem, his wife included, and that he alone remains pure. Hawthorne's story makes clear that Brown is unable during his life to go beyond his blanket condemnation of the people of Salem. My students in their analysis of the story are similarly limited. Neither Goodman Brown nor my students can escape what Jean Piaget terms egocentrism, the lack of awareness of anything outside one's immediate experience. (Pulaski 232)

Virtually absolute in infants, physical egocentrism diminishes as children move through the preoperational and operational stage of development and become capable of operating physically in the world, a process largely complete by the age of eight or nine. After that, at about twelve years of age, according to Piaget, a child begins to acquire the ability to perform formal operations, involving logical propositions and hypothetical reasoning. (Pulaski 234) Yet the ability to operate on a formal level does not mean that a child, or even a late adolescent or adult, has moved away from an egocentrism which is almost a variety of solipsism.

Piaget felt that the adolescent suffers from "a relative failure to distinguish between his own point of view as an individual called upon to organize a life program and the point of view of the group which he wishes to reform." (Gruber and Voneche 439-440) For many this confusion persists into adulthood. Piaget said:

> Many adults are still egocentric in their way of thinking. Such people interpose between themselves and reality an imaginary or mystical world, and they reduce everything to this individual point of view. Unadapted to ordinary conditions, they seem immersed in an inner life that is all the more intense. Does this make them more conscious of themselves? Does egocentrism point the way to truer introspection? On the contrary, it can easily be seen that there is a way of living in oneself that develops a great wealth of inexpressible feelings, of personal images and schemas, while at the same time it impoverishes analysis and consciousness of self. (Gruber and Voneche 95)

This egocentrism is likely to be more pronounced in some areas than in others. In particular, it may persist in reading and writing. Piaget indicated that egocentrism tends to disappear before two years of age from individuals' physical activity. (Pulaski 24) In speech, according to Lev Vygotsky, individuals tend to internalize their speech--swallow it--as part of their developing skill in speaking. (Vygotsky 17) People learn to read and write much later and under far more artificial conditions. They are formally educated in reading and writing, and they read and write relatively infrequently. Their

egocentrism persists in these activities, perhaps linked to their lack of skill and attendant awkwardness and discomfort in these areas.

The degree of egocentrism in students at the level I am discussing--first or second year of college, eighteen or nineteen years of age--is indicated to some degree in their writing. In Verbal Behavior: Adaptation and Psychopathology, Walter Weintraub, M.D., examined the language used in free speech by various test groups. For Weintraub free speech involved recording ten minutes of spontaneous, non-directed speech of individuals and then analyzing it for various features, among them the frequency of us of the word "I." According to Weintraub, very frequent use of "I" may indicate "self-preoccupation." (Weintraub 26) Self-preoccupation and egocentrism are synonymous.

In children between the ages of five and seven, up to the age at which Vygotsky says that egocentric speech disappears, Weintraub found that the frequency of "I" per thousand words of free speech was about 85. In individuals between the ages of 18 and 45 the rate had dropped to about 47 "I's" per thousand words. (Weintraub 57)

Weintraub discusses the relationship of free speech to free writing, noting that in a limited test of medical students (14 of them) asked to produce both, the frequency of "I" was lower in the writing (40.6/1000) than in the speech (47.6/1000) and it did not differ radically from the ratio of others in that age group. (Weintraub 143-144)

A study I have undertaken of 14 students' free writings written in the course of a semester shows far different results. While Weintraub had his subjects write only once, long enough to produce 1000 words, my students wrote as often as thirteen times (ranging from seven to thirteen) for ten minutes at a time. The number of words produced by the students ranges from 1129 to 3061. The frequency of "I" ranges from a low of 41.6 per 1000 words to a high of 108.4. The mean for the group was 73.4 per 1000 words, not much lower than that of Weintraub's five to seven year olds. For twelve of my students, "I" was the word used most frequently. In the freewritings of the student using "I" least often, it was third; of the student using it second least, it was second; of the student using it third least, it tied with another as the most often used word.

If Weintraub's interpretation of the implication of the frequent use of "I" is valid, then its high incidence in the freewriting of underclass college students may very well be evidence of egocentrism. This may account for their almost universal inability to go beyond the superficial in a story like "Young Goodman Brown." Such egocentrism would stymie critical thought.

If my conjectures are valid, developing critically perceptive readings of literature in students must involve reducing their egocentrism. How? Let me suggest four things we must develop in our students, without undertaking the risk and labor of indicating how they are to be achieved. That, of course, is the real challenge. First, the need to understand

their reading at a level more complex than the most evident. Second, objectivity about their reading. Third, the recognition that irony is frequent, perhaps ubiquitous, in fiction, and they must develop an eye, or ear, for it. Finally, a tolerance, even embrace, of ambiguity.

Regarding the need readers must feel in order to come to a mature understanding of literature, we can again turn to Piaget. Piaget observed that children develop mentally when their equilibrium, their world view, is disrupted. (Gruber and Voneche 820-831) Something in their world is out of order, and they need to adjust to this perceived change. For example, children under the age of seven usually cannot understand that when a ball of clay is rolled out into a cigar shape the amount of clay in the object remains the same. (Pulaski 31-31) Children must recognize this concept, the conservation of matter, and then adapt to it. (Pulaski 9-12)

Accompanying the leap in understanding is the feeling of need to make that leap. Stimulating individuals to feel that need is a major difficulty in areas involving higher order reasoning. Probably the majority of individuals feel little or no need to come to terms with literature, or formal logic, or ethics, or advanced mathematics, for example. Their arguments--"What is the use of this?", "Will this serve me in my daily life or help me to get a job?"--often seem unanswerable, but the teacher must find responses.

Next, in interpreting literature students must be encouraged to move away from subjectivity towards objectivity. Piaget said, "...it is easy to see how much more easily the child is led to satisfy his desires and to judge from his own personal point of view than to enter into that of others to arrive at an objective view." (Gruber and Voneche 280)

One possible method of achieving objectivity is by emphasizing the aspect of audience. Much has been written about audience in literary criticism and communication theory, primarily examining how a writer or speaker may identify and appeal to audiences. In this instance, the aim should be to persuade students to see themselves as the audience.

In "Young Goodman Brown," for example, is it credible that Hawthorne wrote the story so that its readers should come to a very easy and simplistic explication? What about the editors of the anthology who included the story and the teacher who requires that students read it? Are they simply insisting on overcomplicating the story or have they chosen obscure and difficult works out of sheer spite? By consciously seeing themselves as audiences, students may well achieve the objectivity that permits them to accept that Hawthorne's story is not simple and editors and teacher do not choose it out of perversity.

The unsophisticated reader has a tendency to identify with the protagonist. (Often this act results in the reader incorrectly identifying the protagonist. In Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" readers often assume Bartleby is the protagonist,

not the unnamed narrator; and in Conrad's Heart of Darkness readers tend to see Kurtz, not the narrator, Marlow, as protagonist. These two works, popular selections by teachers of literature, engender indifference or hostility in students who may resent what they view as being fooled into making incorrect choices.) This identification with the protagonist may help us understand why students so uncritically accept Brown's view of his experience. But if the students attempt to see Brown from the point of view of the other characters in the story--his wife or the other townspeople (even the narrator)--their opinion may change markedly. The evidence of Brown's pervasive egocentrism, his failure to grow up, should gradually become apparent.

After achieving a measure of objectivity, the reader may still be unable to reach a self-satisfying interpretation of a work of literature. Much of this difficulty seems to derive from problems with language--limited exposure to written language and lack of extensive use of it prevents understanding how it is manipulated. Student writing is virtually devoid of figurative language, yet such language--particularly the tropes: a word or expression used in a different sense from that which properly belongs to it, for giving life or emphasis to an idea--is indispensable to literature and offers us keys to unlock the doors to the significance of what we read.

The recognition of one trope, irony, is mandatory if one wishes to understand and thus appreciate literature. Irony itself involves "the reality different from the masking appearance," and in verbal irony "the actual intent is expressed

in words which carry the opposite meaning." As Holman says in A Handbook to Literature, "The ability to recognize irony is one of the surest tests of intelligence and sophistication." (236) That being so, and literature being replete with irony, successfully critical readers must be able to detect it.

In a sense all tropes, including irony, can be considered varieties of allusion, allusion being a reference to something the reader is expected to know. As A Handbook to Literature aptly puts it: "The effectiveness of allusion depends on there being a common body of knowledge shared by writer and reader." (12)

In "Young Goodman Brown" the man whom we come to recognize as the devil says when he and Brown meet, "You are late, Goodman Brown....The clock of the Old South was striking as I came through Boston; and that is full fifteen minutes agone." The allusion to Boston's Third Church, established in 1669, is frequently footnoted in texts, as is the church's importance as a landmark of religious freedom. But beyond that in significance to the story is that the church is in Boston, Goodman Brown and his companion are just outside Salem, a distance of some 15 miles, and no human means of transportation could have conveyed Brown's companion that distance in 15 minutes.

As a type of allusion, irony in a work of literature can be recognized by the reader only when the reader has a body of knowledge extensive enough that it substantially coincides with the knowledge displayed by the writer. This requires in the reader maturity and objectivity, a long-felt need to acquire a

broad range of information, love of the texture of language--in short, intelligence and sophistication. The task, then, is to catalyze and sustain these reactions in the lives of students.

Finally, student readers must be capable of discerning and accepting ambiguity. The ability to see irony in literature is a major step, for literary irony is not simply meaning the opposite of what is said. Rather, what is meant can lie somewhere between the language used and its semantic opposite or it can be a mixture of both. Neither an entire work of non-didactic literature nor any part of it can be summarized by a moral or a thesis sentence.

The matter of ambiguity extends to the problem of egocentrism itself, for in urging that students be led or driven towards objectivity I have oversimplified the situation. Students must be egocentric in order to believe that they and their opinions have value. At the same time they must be objective in an attempt to escape from a too personal reading of literature or view of the world. We need to seek not a balance of egocentrism and objectivity but a wavering between the two, a state of permanent disequilibrium.

Young Goodman Brown never achieved that condition. His story is one of incomplete initiation into the problems and complexities of adulthood and the knowledge of the existence of good and evil. Goodman Brown fails to complete his initiation because he cannot accept that human beings are at once both good and evil. In this significant area, at least, Brown is incapable of critical thought.

We must strive to insure that here our students and Young Goodman Brown part company.

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